

# **Village Center Revitalization**

## **Town Center Listening Session May 14, 2008 Meeting Summary**

### **Introduction**

Bill Mackey and Dace Blaumanis of the Department of Planning and Zoning, Candace Dodson-Reed, the County's Community Liaison, and Jessica Feldmark, Senior Advisor to the County Executive, were present at the Town Center Community Association meeting held on May 14, 2008. Bill Mackey introduced the purpose of the meeting and facilitated the discussion by using a series of questions on village center revitalization. About 16 people attended. The meeting notes provide a summary of the listening session. Comments have been reorganized so that they are grouped by topic.

### **Town Center Discussion**

#### **What Works Well?**

Residents noted that Town Center is not a village, and they feel aligned with Wilde Lake Village Center. They believe Wilde Lake is a special place because it still has its original village green, which continues to attract people who can sit and visit in a pedestrian-friendly center without worrying about the dangers of traffic. Wilde Lake was the first village in Columbia, and it could be a model for the village center revitalization efforts. Because of its historic status, revitalization of the Wilde Lake Village Center merits special consideration and a long-term, deliberative process. One participant suggested that this Village Center could be recognized as an historic district.

#### **What Changes Might Improve the Village Center?**

Residents want to keep the village centers and want them to work well. Residents want more than commercial facilities in the village centers; they also want the community centers, the village green, CA's recreational facilities and parks to be there. They want village centers that are gathering places. One resident talked about turning the stores around to open them up, to face out and to attract more people. A few residents mentioned the lack of signs hinder businesses. People driving by may not be aware of the businesses that are located nearby but are not visible from the road. Impulse buying cannot happen in this scenario.

Several participants talked about having more support for small, mom and pop type businesses that they value. Some believe that smaller businesses have been driven out. Instead they should be encouraged, perhaps as incubator businesses supported by the county or by EDA. An anchor store or more residents in the centers are needed to maintain the small businesses. With the addition of larger stores such as Harris Teeter in Kings Contrivance Village Center, one participant asked if the other business there would suffer or prosper. Others reported poor management by another grocery store that consequently drove customers away.

One resident remarked that considering the education and wealth of Columbia's residents, the lack of more imaginative entrepreneurs in the village centers is surprising. Could this be because of GGP's control or the design restrictions and covenants placed on property? If there were no rules, would there be more creativity?

### **What should be the Process for Village Center Revitalization?**

Some residents are concerned about any new zoning for the village centers. Some expressed their apprehension regarding Kimco, because they have heard that Kimco's process is to improve their centers and then sell them. They fear that the County will simply ratify what Kimco wants. Instead, they want the people to be involved and their voices to be heard. Knowledgeable people and residents should be brought together to do some thinking and research about what is possible. One resident advocated a more formal role for Bob Tennenbaum in this process.

Some expressed their idea that because GGP does not control the village centers, the centers are separate entities that do not function as parts of a whole. The village centers are not currently organized together, although there had been a business association in the past. One resident asked if there should be a master plan for each village, and another suggested that there should be coordination between the Downtown development in Town Center and the village center revitalization efforts.

In response to the question about whether or not the community wants a new process to allow the Final Development Plan to be changed, residents were not sure how the process should change or who should be the gatekeeper. One participant said that the Columbia plan and the Zoning Board should replace GGP as the gatekeeper. Some think the village center association should have a strong role and could act as an intermediary. One resident suggested that review by a professional design panel would help improve the village centers. Another participant suggested that GGP offer to include village centers in their plans and, as a trade off, give up their gatekeeper role for the village centers.

### **What Land Uses Might be Appropriate in the Village Center?**

Some residents think including mixed uses in the village centers is an excellent idea. It is a world-wide trend and the way to go. They believe it is necessary to have residents close to the commercial uses in the village centers so they can support those businesses. One resident mentioned being in Bethesda where new shops have apartments located above them that resulted in a vibrant, attractive area, the kind people want. One resident questioned if rental residential units would be good for the village centers. The key to successful affordable housing is good design, offered one resident, and others advocated for having a diversity of types of units offered, both in size and in price. A full spectrum of the type of units would be the goal, but they do not want restrictions on how many units each village center should have.

Each village center is different and therefore demands different solutions. There is concern about what the density should be. The density cap should be determined by a democratic community process. One participant mentioned co-housing as a possible housing type. It could be an appropriate housing type especially for the elderly and for young people. The demographics of Howard County might support co-housing for the elderly because of the expected increase of that age group in the county.

Another idea would be to have different village centers specialize in specific international products, such as foods from different nations. One resident mentioned having library services in the village centers, recalling the satellite library that once existed in Wilde Lake Village Center.

### **Closing Comments**

Participants remarked that they valued this discussion.

